

# The Danger of Leaving Children in Hot Cars

## Hot Car Fatalities: Statistics and Trends

Leaving a child in a hot car has become a significant concern throughout communities in the United States, with an average of nearly 38 children dying in hot cars each year.<sup>1</sup> According to Kids and Car Safety, an organization dedicated to saving the lives of children in and around vehicles through data collection, analysis, and awareness campaigns, there have been 1,165 child deaths from hot car fatalities or heatstroke between 1990 and 2024.<sup>2</sup>

Indiana has also been affected by this issue, accounting for 16 of those fatalities and ranking 21<sup>st</sup> out of 50 states in child hot car deaths. Notably, since 2020, there have been zero reported hot car fatalities involving children in Indiana, representing a marked improvement in the state's efforts to address this preventable tragedy.<sup>1</sup>

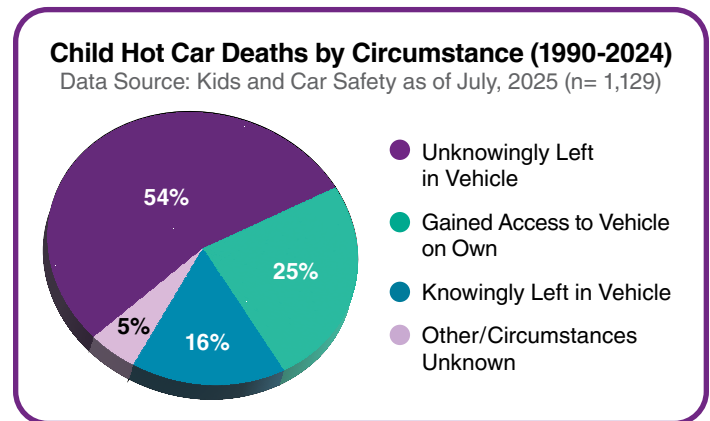
## Understanding How Hot Car Deaths Happen

You may ask yourself, "How does something like this happen?" or believe that it could never occur in your family. However, research from Kids and Car Safety reveals that common misconceptions about the causes of child hot car deaths do not reflect the reality of most cases.

Contrary to popular belief, only a small number of these tragedies involve factors such as drug or alcohol use, prior involvement with Child Protective Services, or neglect. In fact, the analysis found that 54% of child hot car deaths involved loving, responsible parents who unknowingly left their child in the vehicle, often thinking they had already dropped them off at daycare.<sup>1</sup>

This data underscores that these incidents can happen to anyone, regardless of their background or intentions. It emphasizes the importance of awareness and preventive measures for all parents and caregivers.

Take the tragic case of an Indiana father, Andrew Dill and his 3-year-old son. Mr. Dill and his family had several things going on that week and were preparing for a family vacation.



Mr. Dill's morning routine was changed as it was his responsibility to drop off their son to daycare that July morning. He parked his car and went to work like usual and forgot to drop off his son at daycare. When he finished his day, he returned to his car to discover that he had left his son strapped in his car seat all day.<sup>3</sup> This serves as a heartbreaking reminder of how easily such incidents can occur, even among the most attentive caregivers.

## The Science Behind Hot Car Deaths

The dangers posed by hot cars are rooted in science and can have fatal consequences in a very short period of time. On a warm day, the temperature inside a parked vehicle can increase rapidly, often reaching life-threatening levels within just a few minutes. Even if the windows are left slightly open, the heat inside the car can quickly become unbearable, leading to heatstroke and, ultimately, death.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) highlights that heatstroke can occur when a person's core body temperature rises to 104 degrees Fahrenheit. If the core temperature climbs to 107 degrees Fahrenheit or higher, death can result. Children are especially at risk because their bodies heat up three to five times faster than those of adults. This heightened vulnerability makes them more susceptible to the rapid and extreme temperature changes inside a hot car.<sup>4</sup>

Further compounding this risk, Kids and Car Safety explains that the interior of a vehicle acts much like a greenhouse, trapping heat and causing the temperature to soar quickly. The temperature inside a parked car can reach 125 degrees Fahrenheit within minutes, regardless of whether the windows are cracked open. In fact, research shows that 80% of the total temperature increase inside the car happens within the first 10 minutes of exposure to sunlight. It is important to understand that cracking the windows does not significantly slow down this heating process or reduce the maximum temperature reached inside the vehicle.<sup>5</sup>

## Understanding Forgotten Baby Syndrome and Prevention Strategies

High temperatures, when combined with the stresses of parenting, significantly increase the risk of accidentally leaving a child in a hot car, which can lead to tragic consequences. This scenario is referred to as “forgotten baby syndrome” (FBS), a term coined by Dr. David Diamond.<sup>6</sup> Several contributing factors can make it more likely for caregivers to forget their children in vehicles. For example, disruptions in daily routines—such as a change in who is responsible for drop-off—can cause lapses in memory, as seen in the case of Mr. Dill.

Cognitive overload from managing multiple responsibilities can further overwhelm a caregiver’s attention. High levels of stress and fatigue may impair cognitive functions and memory, making it more challenging to remain focused on all responsibilities. Additionally, environmental distractions such as phone calls or text messages can divert attention away from the immediate task of ensuring a child’s safety in the car.

The consequences of these oversights can be devastating. To help prevent such tragedies, education and awareness are essential. Parents and caregivers should be encouraged to adopt practical strategies to ensure children are not forgotten in vehicles. For instance, Kids and Car Safety recommends several preventive measures:

- **Establish a consistent routine:** Make it a habit to check the back seat every time you exit the car, regardless of whether you think you have your child with you. Consistency helps reinforce this crucial behavior.
- **Place personal items in the back seat:** Put your briefcase, purse, or another important item in the back seat next to your child. This ensures you will look in the back before leaving your vehicle.
- **Set a reminder on your phone:** Use your phone to set an alarm or reminder to check the back seat at your expected arrival time at work, which is especially useful if you are in a hurry.
- **Communication:** After dropping off your child, send a quick text message to confirm the drop-off, or ask your spouse to do the same. Simple messages like “Thanks for taking the kids to daycare!” help reinforce communication and serve as reminders.

It is important to approach this issue with compassion and understanding, acknowledging that no parent or caregiver is immune from making a mistake. Community awareness campaigns also play a vital role in changing perceptions and behaviors. Sharing stories like that of Andrew Dill helps build empathy and understanding, showing that these tragedies can happen to anyone.

CareSource is dedicated to protecting children by spreading awareness and encouraging preventive measures. By working together, we can help prevent these heartbreaking incidents from happening in our communities and across our state.



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**“Check the Back Seat: A Quick Look Can Save a Life!”**

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